

Transforming peasantries in India and China: comparative investigations of institutional dimensions

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Abstract *My lecture is about the study of transforming peasantries, in two senses: both as the subjects, as well as the agents of societal transformation. The differential development performance of rural India and China is explained through stylised micro-comparisons drawn from longitudinal village, and synthetic field studies conducted by the author in both countries since the 1970s, highlighting the salience of contrasting rural institutional factors, using a string of binary contrasting features displayed by the Indian village vis-a-vis the collectives of rural China. The micro-cosmic comparison poses a puzzling paradox: Chinese rural development performance easily outstripped Indian achievements in the first three decades of its collectivist path, from 1949–1978, despite the upheavals associated with the Great Leap Forward and the large-scale famines of the time. But, if the initial conditions of the two countries were remarkably equivalent, and if the external factors, state macro and inter-sectoral policies were no more, and in some respects, considerably less favourable in China than in India, how can one explain the superior Chinese performance in the countryside virtually across the board for this early high-collectivism period that laid the foundations for the subsequent high-growth trajectory at the national level? Why did rural China pull ahead, why did India lag behind? The micro-cosmic comparisons of rural institutions are used to resolve this paradox. The answer lies in the crucial differentiated role of the institutional dimension in the two countries. Chinese advantage originates not in the market reforms era, but in the socialist period when the countryside was organised in rural collectives. In India, rural institutions were generally obstructive, sticky,*

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and posed a constraint to policies of rapid transformation; in China, the institutional profile, far from setting a constraint, was itself converted into a policy instrumental variable, where institutional features were designed and periodically redesigned primarily using the criteria of their functional appropriateness for generating rural accumulation and growth.

Keywords India-China comparison · Rural institutions · Village studies · Rural collectives · Technological change · Comparative development performance

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Radha Kamal Mukerjee, 1889–1968

“I was trained”, Radha Kamal Mukerjee says, “to think in large terms. Right from the start, I had accepted the synthesis of the social sciences, and it has followed me ever since” (cited in Hegde 2011, p. 50). A visionary of panoramic perspectives, a polymath of prodigious productivity, the Indian founder of the subject of social ecology, Radha Kamal Mukerjee was not only a promulgator of paradigms, but also a builder of institutions. He walked his talk. He authored over 50 books alongside his myriad other research, teaching, professional and institutional contributions. One accomplished reviewer of his *The Dynamics of Morals*, published in 1950, declares, “In an age of specialization, Radha Kamal Mukerjee was a man who knew everything” (Celarent 2013b, p. 1736). He would rise daily at 3 am to practise yoga and meditation, and would then proceed to the day’s writing and dictation: “write ten pages a day and you will have fulfilment”, he told a student, and we can fairly assume that he must have practised as he preached. When ever did he find time to read and reflect, let alone for rest and repose? “Perhaps my generation is over by now”, he said in 1958, aged 69; and perhaps he was right, they don’t make them like that anymore.

Developing from his initial formal training in economics, Mukerjee evolved into an extraordinary social scientist. Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1989), writing a memorial on the occasion of the birth centenary of Radha Kamal Mukerjee, distils the essence of his intellectual approach into three elements. First, though trained formally in the subject, he “conceived economics as a specialization, and not as a discipline, in the realm of social science”; second, he elevated the “appraisal of social reality from a unidisciplinary or interdisciplinary outlook ... to a transdisciplinary perspective within the unitary discipline of social science”; and third, he “introduced the ‘institutional approach’... [within] the rubric of social science”.

Ramkrishna Mukherjee observes that such a willing, indeed wilful, transgression of established disciplinary boundaries was unacceptable to its various gatekeepers, or to the “contemporary mandarins” of the individual disciplines of social science, whether in economics or sociology, and “therefore, Mukerjee became a *bratya*, a marginal man in the realm of social science”, an academic outcaste. The other side of the coin of exclusion can be liberty; and rejection had its silver lining in the form of freedom to practise social science as he thought fit. He defied the artificial boundaries of conventional disciplines; he was undisciplined, unbounded, but not ungrammared, as should be evident for instance from his foundational work on human ecology and the environment, though his subject, of which he is now justly regarded as a pioneer, was largely ignored by academicians and policymakers of the time and that sadly continues to this day. In this regard, his remarkable prescience made him a man not whose time was over, but a thinker well ahead of his time.

In a cumulative body of work as copious, wide-ranging and freethinking as his,¹ it would be impossible for anyone, whether then or now, not to find specific areas of difference in perspective or opinion, or discomfort with aspects of style and composition

¹ For a sampling of the tip of the iceberg of his work, see Mukerjee (1916, 1934, 1938, 1945, 1950).

– cited thus, for instance, could be: for some, his proclivity towards Hinduism; his treatment of the dimensions of gender and population in his oeuvre; or his construction and espousal, in resonance with Tagore and Gandhi, of an indigenous, intrinsically “Indian” development path or model – the latter drawing a significant early critique in *Indian versus Western Industrialism*, the title of a work by his contemporary Brij Narain in 1919 (discussed and reproduced in Krishnamurty 2009).

1.2 Structure of the Lecture

In this lecture in his honour, I am guided by two signposts that he laid down: the first, to transcend specialisations and disciplines and to view social realities within a more holistic transdisciplinary framework; the second, to integrate institutional dimensions into the frame of social enquiry. Even a holistic transdisciplinary approach can still only be a means, a method for achieving a superior understanding of social reality. To what end is such an approach employed? What are the questions?

My lecture is about the study of transforming peasantries. I use the term in two senses: peasantries both as the subjects as well as the agents of societal transformation. In what follows, I will attempt to explain the differential performance of rural India and China through micro-comparisons drawn from field study and observations in both countries. I highlight the salience of contrasting rural institutional factors in explaining the differential outcomes. I start by posing and elaborating on a paradox which defines the research question for this lecture. In the following sections, I use a set of longitudinal village studies to investigate the interplay of technological change and institutional profiles in the case of rural India, using the studied village as a prism for an exploration of these linkages. Thereafter, I provide a highly stylised comparison between the rural Indian and the collectivist rural Chinese institutional frameworks and development processes using a string of binary, microcosmic contrasting features. I use these comparisons to attempt to resolve the paradox posed.

1.3 China and India: Posing a Paradox

China has had two revolutions, two transitions: the first towards socialism, and the second, away from it towards capitalism. It has been my contention that the achievements of the former laid the foundation for the performance of the latter. China now leads India on virtually all counts of development; but it was already significantly ahead by 1978, the starting point of the second transition. That advantage was gained not in the market reforms era, but in the socialist period when the Chinese countryside was institutionally reorganised into rural collectives.

The microcosmic comparison between the Indian and the Chinese village² was propelled by a puzzling paradox. On the one side, Chinese rural development

² One people’s commune in rural China would comprise approximated 10 production brigades; in turn, each brigade contained about 10 production teams, the most basic unit of account. The teams were the collective owners of their land; the brigades contained a variety of non-farm activities and enterprises along with some specialised agricultural functions, and the commune level had small-scale rural industrial enterprises generally of a larger scale than those found at the brigade level. The production brigade, with its intermediate and micro-level enterprises, and the production teams with their agriculture, thus form a

performance easily outstripped Indian achievements in the first three decades of its collectivist path, say from 1949–1978, despite the upheavals associated with the Great Leap Forward and the large-scale famines of the time. This is supported by a wide variety of evidence: output and input levels, infrastructural development and mechanisation, the use of electrical power, and significantly, in terms of human development indicators, for instance the overall death rate which plummeted over the period in sharp contrast to Indian trends. Both India and China had similar crude death rates in 1960: 23.52 in India and a less favourable 25.43 in China; in 1977, the Indian rate had dropped to 14.1 while China's had plummeted to 6.25 in 1978, a level that has been roughly maintained to the present.

On the other side, it is arguable that the external conditions of the rural sector were no more, and in some respects clearly less favourable in China than in India. For instance, overall state public investment in agriculture had approximately the same relative importance in the budget; and in both countries, in its design, plan strategies accorded some protection to the small-scale, mostly rural manufacturing and handicrafts sectors against competition from the rising urban large-scale manufacturing sector.

If anything, some factors in China weighed against the rural sector; in India, there were no taxes on agricultural/rural incomes though this was not the case in rural China, and the inter-sectoral terms of trade were biased against agriculture in China, in sharp contrast to the Indian case for this period when richer agriculturists received, as they continue to do, very significant subsidies on irrigation water, fertilisers and electrical power.

This introduces the paradox: if the initial conditions of the two countries were quite remarkably similar, and if the external conditions of the rural sector were either similar or more favourable for the rural sector in India than in China, how can one explain the superior Chinese performance in the countryside, virtually across the board for this significant early period that laid the foundations for the subsequent high-growth trajectory at the national level? Why did rural China pull ahead, why did India lag behind?

Elsewhere (Saith 2008a; 2010), I have analysed this paradox at an aggregated national level and come to the conclusion that the answer lies in the crucial differentiated role of the institutional dimensions in the two countries. In India, rural institutions were generally obstructive, sticky, and posed a constraint to policies of rapid transformation; in China, the institutional profile, far from setting a constraint, was itself converted into a policy instrumental variable, where institutional features were designed and redesigned primarily using the criteria of their functional appropriateness for generating rural accumulation and growth. In this lecture, I return to this paradox, but this time at the micro-level, looking especially into the internal institutional features of an Indian village.

Footnote 2 continued

unit that could be compared sensibly with an Indian village such as Parhil also known as Kishan Garhi that features in this paper. In size, Parhil with a population of about a thousand in 1970 was approximately the size of a rural Chinese production brigade.

On the Indian side, I rely on the longitudinal analysis of a single village, Parhil, in which I have been involved in joint research with Ajay Tankha, since 1970.

I use our surveys carried out in 1970 and then in 1987 covering a period appropriate for this enquiry.³ Significantly, this village, under the name Kishan Garhi,⁴ was earlier studied by the Chicago anthropologist, McKim Marriott, and his writings, reflecting his research during his first study in 1950–52, and second visit in 1968, serve both to extend the period under observation, and provide another perspective to the review.

Unlike this Indian story told through the case of a village studied separately by two researchers over time, the Chinese tale is a synthetic construction incorporating my own research in very many locations in rural China during about a dozen short study visits, usually lasting 2–4 weeks, since 1979. None of the units visited were revisited though in very many units, data were obtained on the recent evolution of the unit. Findings from most of this research have been published. What follows is based on an understanding derived from this cumulative body of work. It provides a general account of processes of rural transformation during the era of high collectivism, 1962–78, most closely associated with Maoist strategies of socialist development.

Perhaps inevitably, in view of its idiosyncratic source materials, the lecture employs diverse approaches and methods. It addresses the research question in a comparative framework. Potentially, comparisons offer the possibility of triangulation, and often by seeing others you can recognise your own self better. It combines book and field, though advocates of the field might have underestimated the extent to which the book forms the precious personal baggage, the security blanket that every researcher carries to the field. It relies both on macro with the micro perspectives in pursuing its questions. It occasionally touches on historical dimensions. It favours a more holistic social science perspective, and in keeping with Mukerjee's prescription, accords no special status to economics; and if all this was not enough, it gives primacy to the institutional dimension in understanding difference and dynamics. Too often, institutions are taken as a latent given, an invisible and passive part of the furniture of the arena in which the forces of supply and demand are assumed to battle it out. One needs to go beyond this and activate this dimension as a dynamic element in analysis and explanations. This list is too long, and so I fear it guarantees failure.

2 ENTERING THE VILLAGE

With due apologies, I start with some autobiographical bits and pieces with the justification that these have some bearing on what follows.

³ Findings are reported in Saith and Tankha (1972a, 1972b, 1992, 1993, 1997).

⁴ For an extensive, though not exhaustive coverage of Marriott's work on this village, see: Marriott (1952a, 1952b, 1955a, 1955b, 1955c, 1968, 1972, 1973, 1975, 2008).

2.1 Economics and Sociology, Never the Twain Shall Meet?

At the time of the founding of Lucknow University in 1921, Radha Kamal Mukerjee established a combined Department of Economics and Sociology, and served it as professor and head till 1955; the department also incorporated the disciplines of anthropology, social work, social psychology and population science. A young student walking through the portal of the department could not but have had a sustained exposure to multidisciplinary, not least on account of the intellectual breadth and dynamism of the major figures associated with what came to be called the Lucknow School.⁵

2.2 The Serendipitous Encounter With Parhil

The Saith and Tankha studies have an idiosyncratic origin. In 1969–70, K.N. Raj, then director of the Delhi School of Economics, was unconvinced by some gung-ho interpretations of the Green Revolution that were being aired, including those by McKim Marriott after his revisit of 1968 to Kishan Garhi. He thought it would be a very good learning exercise for us to go to the village directly for an independent view. “Go and find out first about rural India!” I recall him saying; the start of the doctoral project could wait a bit, and it would only benefit from this exposure, he felt. We had not reckoned on the protocol of gatekeeping, and were sharply admonished by a senior sociologist for having “entered Kim’s village without his explicit permission”. The identity of the village was in the open; we were not aware of such protocol; we were commissioned by none other than one of India’s most respected economists; so off we went to Parhil, the real name of the village.

2.3 Like an Indian in Bharat

The entry into the village was not easy or comfortable, and not because the villagers were unwelcoming. It had more to do with one’s own identity and the baggage one

⁵ Unfortunately, I had no such luck when entering the Faculty of Economics and Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics. Each discipline, led by its own heavyweight academic *thekedar*, was entrenched in its own department and building, running their own independent and non-intersecting curricula and seminars, generally casting aspersions and an evil gaze on each other, while claiming intellectual superiority. It was always one binary battle or the other: economics versus sociology; caste versus class; purpose versus meaning; observation versus measurement; Raj versus Srinivas, or Srinivas versus Srinivasan; Marxists versus the rest. Younger staff were regimented foot soldiers; students, just cannon fodder. The silent grammar of commensality forbade unwarranted contact; only a select few exercised the freedom to cross the border, perhaps to maintain minimal functional communication between the warring tribes. Late in the day, an attempt was made to set up *Conversations between Economists and Anthropologists*, but predictably it turned out to be the proverbial dialogue of the deaf (Bardhan and Srinivasan 1989). It was all sometimes a pantomime, sometimes a cacophony, but always a farce. Information took the addictive forms of gossip and rumour. But, all this notwithstanding, economics and sociology did meet regularly, in the coffee house: most students in Sociology were female, most in Economics, male – which perhaps partly explains the gendering of the two disciplines – and they met up in the neutral territory of the DSE coffee house strategically located, equidistant between the two buildings. For recollections of some other contemporaries, see Kumar and Mookherjee (1995).

was carrying, and these realisations wrapped themselves very quickly as we stepped into village space.

I was not born in a village; neither was either of my parents, nor any of my grandparents, or even great grandparents on either side. I had seen a lot of rural India, but through the windows of rail compartments, though I had spent a couple of months in deep rural Palamau during the Bihar Famine of 1966–67 (Roy, Saith and Singh 1967). But that did not prepare me for living in the village. So, almost the first realisation that hit home was that I was like an alien in my own country; I was an “Indian” in “Bharat”. This was revelatory, salutary and chastening. There was a chasmic distance between the village and my own background. There was a sense of discomfort, at least initially, over the loss of personal “space” and “privacy”. There were no secrets here, not even in the fields one used for daily ablutions and excretions. But underlying, and partially explaining it, is the chasm between “modern” urban and “traditional” rural lives.

All said and done, fieldwork, like mountain climbing, is less pleasurable in real time than in hindsight, when reminiscing about it from a comfortable separation in space and time. Anybody who claims they actually enjoyed their fieldwork is probably a dissembler and more than a little disingenuous.⁶

But there were also unforgettable moments of beauty: lying on a *charpai* in the open, the night sky seemed immediately reachable, touchable; its density of blackness, the piercing brightness of stars; the sounds and calls that travelled far and clear; peacocks, bird life; borewell baths; the strange experience of silence, noiselessness, such that it elongated the sense of time. Away from the extreme ambient light and sound levels of the city, there was a startling realisation of the pleasure of original senses. I digress!

2.4 From Book to Field

Srinivas (1966b, p. 158) is obviously right to emphasise the value of field research,

“the study of a village or a small town or a caste provides a strategic point of entry for the study of Indian society and culture as a whole. It forces the young scholar to keep his mind steadfastly on the existential reality as contrasted with the book-view of society”.

But how far is it really possible to escape the prior baggage of book-views that the researcher carries into the field arena? No clean slates are possible. A Srinivas student would be pre-primed to look at caste, a Rudra student would be pre-prepared to look for class.

Had I just changed one pair of spectacles for another - a Marxian framework in place of a conventional economics template? Class instead of caste? And how would one define “class” with all its ramifications?⁷ Indeed, when re-reading our

⁶ “I enjoyed my fieldwork much more in retrospect than when doing it. I was not a good fieldworker, nothing more than a B- or a B” (Beteille 1986, 0:13:08–0:16:23).

⁷ See for instance, Chayanov (1967); Mukherjee (1957), 1958; Thorner and Thorner (1962), Thorner (1962a, 1962b); Patnaik (1987); Bhattacharya (2001).

original studies of 1972, this effect is palpable, though it is held at bay by the very serious and detailed empirics on which any statements were made, with the content still protected from the style. Andre Beteille speaks wisely about the value of retaining the “messiness” of real situations, rather than ironing these out by the application of preconceived definitions and theories and making all reality conform to it. Even when using some preset frameworks, we retained all the messiness, because it was the source of so much creative reflection.

It is not feasible or necessary to discuss the myriad other issues of engaging in serious fieldwork, from questions of one’s identity and prior intellectual orientation amongst other factors.⁸ Srinivas (1966b, pp. 156–157) says “in the process of putting himself in the shoes of the members of another community, the sociologist becomes to some extent detached from his own”. He quotes Whyte approvingly,

“I began as a non-participating observer. As I became accepted into the community, I found myself becoming almost a non-observing participant”. Srinivas says: “the transition from a non-participating observer to a participating observer cannot happen without the sociologist’s exercising all his powers of empathy”.

This is of course more easily said than done, since how the researcher is perceived or accepted depends overwhelmingly on the “community” that he is studying.⁹ And then there are issues about studying one’s own culture and society or some other (Srinivas 1996).

2.5 Towards Multidisciplinarity: Changing Spectacles

Some, one would imagine like Radha Kamal Mukerjee, are born multidisciplinary; some achieve multidisciplinary; and others have it thrust upon them. Like him, I started my journey as an economist, but was ambushed by the village which veritably demanded multidisciplinary of me. The dismantling of mono-disciplinarity, or lessons in multidisciplinary, started virtually on the first day and came thick and fast. Data gathering has a relational dimension, linking the perceptions and agendas of the researcher and the researched. Simple questions beget complex answers – the size of the village population, or a person’s age or occupation, or the amount of fertiliser used, or the number of goats owned, all have contingent answers and complexities that demand a deeper understanding of the phenomenon before noting down the first statistic, and that too should be pencilled, not inked. How delegation of data collection to the venerable “field investigator” is the death of learning for the researcher, and sometimes of accuracy for the data. How qualitative notes can be recorded diligently in the space dutifully reserved for them, but then get inexorably orphaned and deserted at the stage of data transcription into spreadsheets. As you assemble data by plot, crop, by-product, input and operation,

⁸ For some perspectives on this range of issues, see Beteille and Madan (eds.) (1975), Beteille (1986, 2002), Patel (2011), Srinivas (1960, 1966a, 1966b, 1996).

⁹ See here, for instance, the insightful commentary by Breman (2010) in the volume in honour of Andre Beteille (Karlekar and Mukherjee 2010).

the realisation dawns that good data demands a multiple of the time and resources allocated for the survey,¹⁰ simply to get a reliable figure for earnings or productivity. The discovery that there is nothing like “exogenous”, that lifecycle, episodic, or “chance” events play a crucial and determining role in the lives of families; not to mention the significance of seasonality and time with all the issues it drags in. Then, the awareness of the relatedness of things: the need to research landlords and tenants as pairs; the need to analyse households within their kinship and lineage frameworks or belonging and exchange; the complexity of mapping commensalities; exploring the structure and dynamics of the jajmani system; and the list is endless, even without addressing larger issues of framing and conceptualisation.

Perhaps it was just as well that one did not receive any prior formal instruction on how to study a village or do field work for one might then never have started. As it happened, one just plunged in with the curiosity and commitment of youth and learnt the doing of it through actually doing it.

3 THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGE TRANSFORMED?

This section deals sequentially with the initial study of the Indian village, laying the baseline, conducted by Marriott in 1950–52, followed by his short revisit in 1968 when he made his discovery of positive transformation, which leads to Saith and Tankha’s first study of 1970 where some of this optimism was deflated, and then to their 1987 restudy which provides details of changes over the Green Revolution period.

3.1 An Indian Village in Its Traditional State: Marriott, 1950–52

McKim Marriott did his anthropology at Chicago in an active research-oriented department; its anthropology seminar was well established in the 1950s. He worked in Kishan Garhi during 1950–52, and then wrote a seminal paper on the “overdeveloped village” in the first issue of the new Chicago journal *Economic Development and Cultural Change* in 1955, which should have landed with a thump on the desk of Theodore Schultz who then was the head of the economics department, and also interested in issues of agricultural technology and development; it could hardly have gone unnoticed. Also in the same department during the decade of the 1960s was Clifford Geertz, who in 1963, published his study on *Agricultural Involution in Indonesia*, where there was embedded some kind of a steady state model of technology–institutions interaction at the level of the village. These were variational analyses of rural dynamics. Significantly, Schultz’s own classic *Transforming Traditional Agriculture* was published in 1964, and in it he has characterisations of technology in peasant agriculture that resonate powerfully with the work of Marriott, though perhaps less explicitly so with Geertz (1963). It seems

¹⁰ One is reminded of Walter Neale’s classic sobering review of the problems of village survey data (Neale 1958). See also Mann (1917).

that, unlike the Delhi School of Economics, economists and anthropologists were communicating and having conversations and learning from each other. Effectively, Marriott's graduate study from Kishan Garhi seems to have provided the template for Schultz's "poor but efficient peasants" thesis that won him the Nobel Award later.¹¹

3.1.1 Marriott's "overdeveloped" village in static equilibrium

Marriott's construction of a "static equilibrium" has the structure of a closed model of the relationship between technology and institutions.

"Overdevelopment [is] the pressing of techniques up to and beyond the point of an optimum relation between man and environment. In an overdeveloped area, too many techniques are too exhaustively applied by too many people to too little land [...] much development has occurred in the past, often too much development. Technologies have reached what seems to be a static equilibrium. A technique has little room in which to spread".

"It is usual to think of technology as something that can be added to a rural area to develop it."

"The problems of technological change in an overdeveloped area are not the same as our familiar additive problems. Rarely does technological change merely add new things; more often, it alters the pattern and structure of people's lives. It does not just add, but creates a new structure or pattern, and often destroys an old structure or pattern. In this fact lie some of the most serious practical problems of technical change."

"Overdevelopment means that techniques have come to be tightly interconnected with each other: introduction of another new technique may disrupt or require readjustment of many old techniques."

"Technology in an old, overdeveloped area is likely to have become interconnected with many patterns of personal and social behaviour – groupings, ideas, beliefs. Introduction of a new technique may be followed by acceptance or rejection according to criteria which are not directly technical at all, but social and cultural" (Marriott 1952a, p. 261).

Marriott's analysis of static equilibrium implies an inherent resistance to any change, since there could be considerable transactional cost in the form of collateral adjustments and adaptations required in various arenas, including in tastes and preferences, production technologies, economic and commercial relationships, exchanges between farmers and government officials, between peasants and animals, in attitudes towards borrowing, debt and risk-taking. This would impart any local static equilibrium with a kink, a discontinuity. In turn this would suggest the existence of the usual logistic curve pattern of adoption ranging from early to

¹¹ Runge (2006, p. 10), in his detailed intellectual history of (mostly American) agricultural economics, concludes: "Indeed, T.W. Schultz's famous *Transforming Traditional Agriculture* (1964) relied mainly on stylised representations of "rational but poor" farmers and descriptive analysis from anthropologists." Reading the text and texture of Schultz's descriptions of the poor-but-efficient peasant, this seems entirely plausible.

late adopters, depending on how the circumstances and resource profiles of individual farmers dovetailed with the preconditions and side-effects of the adoption of any new practice. The kink would also imply that conditions favourable to technological change would need to build up to a level where these could spill over the barrier leading to the wider adoption of new methods.

For Marriott, this was the situation in Kishan Garhi in 1950–52, the baseline.

3.1.2 *Institutional reproduction – social competition and contestation*

On the institutional side, Marriott's interest was focussed primarily on ritual aspects of the caste system – the complex matrices of social commensality, the restrictions placed by caste on social behaviour and on the pattern of economic transactions; on caste contestation and competition, and conflict mostly over rank, prestige and privilege, status and authority, with secondary interest in the distribution of resources per se. But through all this, he does offer a perspective on how such a fractious and segmented social framework interfaced with the possibilities of collective action for the village as a whole. The diagnosis is far from optimistic, and seems to suggest a cantankerous, turgid social equilibrium that is dysfunctional to the modernisation project. There is implicit that this a notion of another “static equilibrium”, this time applying to social arrangements, that is analogous to the “static equilibrium” that he explicitly sketches with regard to agricultural technology.

Marriott does comment on internal conflict in Parhil, even though that is far from his central focus. Writing on the basis of his 1950–52 fieldwork, he notes “the weakness of formal local government”, alongside the existence of “intense factional struggle”. “In a sample of thirty-six groups of persons engaged in litigation, half the groups cut across caste lines and joined diverse persons together by allying them in common hostilities.” The village, he suggests, “is the local stage on which relative dominance and relative prestige must be fought out” Marriott (1955c, p. 178). A subsequent commentary (Marriott 1955a) is much more extensive and unequivocal.

Competition and low intensity conflict seemed to permeate all aspects of village social, cultural and institutional life, marking economic, caste, kinship, convivial and political groupings. Marriott (1955a, p. 120) makes the following grim overall assessment of the state of play, and of its wider implications:

“Were the national economy moving smoothly toward the goal of improved sustenance and a better rural life, then the problem of concerted action in villages like Kishan Garhi might not be thought acute. But some amount of concerted action is now required by intense and inequitable competition for static productive resources and static social goods. Most programmes for technical or economic development or rural India require that there be a modicum of local co-operation that disregards primary group affiliations. Officials at all levels recognize the fragmentation of village social structure as a chief obstacle in the way of any programme. The low state of co-operation that presently prevails among the kin groups of Kishan Garhi and the structural features that determine it, suggest that greater concerted action will

be achieved in the future only by a more severe unsettling of basic structures that has occurred in any age of the past.”

Clearly, some sort of foundational upheaval is thought to be a precondition for meaningful collective action for wider rural development.

Kishan Garhi seems clearly to be mired in conflict, not of a form that fundamentally challenges the foundations of social life in the village, but of a continual low intensity form of contestations and bickering, of jockeying and jousting, continual fractious social jostling over rank, prestige and privilege.¹²

Put together, the technological and social equilibria generate an unchanging world of social reproduction. Kishan Garhi is almost akin to a museum piece.

3.2 Marriott Returns – A Generation of Change, 1950–68

Preparing for his return, he had been influenced by the general air of pessimism and criticisms aired by academics, by government officials, by US embassy staff, Ford Foundation¹³ professionals and journalists.

“I therefore had negative expectations when preparing to return to Kishan Garhi village in 1968. Assuming a static technology and growing population, I thought that I would find increasing hunger, dissatisfaction, and conflict in the village. With quickened emigration, there might well be disorganization of families, and a dissolution of the proud peasantry into a rural or urban proletariat. With the devaluing of rural life presumed to accompany these processes, I expected that the village culture of 1951 would be in decline, if not in total disrespect” (Marriott 1972, p. 7).

As supportive evidence, Marriott does not offer conventional statistical comparisons of the usual range of variables, i.e., cropping patterns, production, yield, NPK use, sales, prices and incomes. Instead of relying on numbers, he “chooses instead to proceed empirically” using the medium of photography. On the basis of an archive of 5,800 photographs, 4,300 of which were taken in the 20-week revisit, he provides, with his annotations, a “selection of views arranged as a series of paired comparisons in many aspects of life spanning a generation in the history of the village of Kishan Garhi” (Marriott 1972, p. 7). The collection is obviously selective, and impressively fastidious as an example of archival logging.

“The present selection of visual documents from the corpus of 5,800 frames was determined by the single purpose of showing evidence of continuity and change in the technology, social organisation, and culture of the village between the anthropologist’s two visits” (Marriott 1972, p. 2).

So what kind of changes does he observe? Marriott’s account is strikingly upbeat. He declares the new realities he sees belie the pessimism with which he had returned to the village.

¹² There is an extensive discussion of the baseline situation of 1950–52 in Marriott (1955a, p. 112–121).

¹³ See also Ford Foundation (1979).

3.2.1 *The green revolution package: dynamising agriculture and tradition*

Through his paired photographs and accompanying annotations, Marriott (1972) records various details of the entry of new agricultural technologies into the village: there is a tractor, many more tubewells, some threshers, improved ploughs, more and better irrigation and fertilisers, new skills to service machines, and so on. The study sponsor's preface asserts: "the phenomenon of social and technological change in rural society in the Third World, graphically demonstrated by Professor Marriott, undercuts in vivid and direct fashion the myth that Third World societies are stagnant and unchanging" (Marriott 1972, 111-iv).

"Looking at village life in these ways reveals a generation of change in much more than agricultural technology. Credit, subsidies, electrical power, some fertilisers, improved seeds, and machinery were made available through governmental channels; peasant cultivators then themselves became the main agents of local change. Production, employment population, wages, and charity all rose together. Trends of migration were reversed, and local conflict declined. Diet, clothing, housing and health improved along with agricultural prosperity. Family life also prospered, distinguishing the same roles and relationships, but modifying styles of behaviour, especially for women and children. Distinctions of rank among castes were reduced. Education became a part of rural life for many, and enriched the contents of local religion. Classical, courtly, and new urban styles were influential in many spheres (in dress, dance, music, architecture, and social manners), but were balanced by a renaissance of interest in the symbolic, expressive culture (the language, paintings, and festivals, especially) of the village itself."

"What has happened during this generation of change in the average, conservative, remote village of Kishan Garhi is probably not exceptional. Visitors from districts to the East and South of Aligarh look enviously at the new tubewells, tractors, and brick buildings. Villagers from districts to the North in Uttar Pradesh and in Punjab speak disparagingly of the drop yields, illiteracy, and relatively slight electrification and mechanisation that they see in Kishan Garhi. The people of Kishan Garhi themselves say both that they have come a long way in the past 18 years and that they expect to ... during the next generation..." (partially illegible transcript, Marriott 1972, pp. 33-34).

3.2.2 *Institutional evolution: a harmonious turn?*

As with technology, economy and levels of living, Marriott is surprised by the harmonious turn in village social and institutional affairs under the impact of the new technology. The village is virtually offered as a model of harmonious modernisation, a win-win for all – indeed, incorporating a renaissance of tradition with cultural rejuvenation rather than the loss and destruction he had originally anticipated.

This overall assessment is not confirmed in Saith and Tankha's 1970 study, where village political institutions are seen still to be moribund, exclusionary, controlled by the rich farmers, without any election held to the gram panchayat at all over the entire period. Here, technological advance is not viewed as having induced, or run in parallel with, progressive social change.

For Marriott, the modernisation model was fully on track by 1968, with the village exhibiting clear signs of moving from static equilibrium to dynamic harmony in both the domains of technology and institutions.

Perhaps it does indeed lie in the eye of the beholder. Is the glass half empty or half full? Marriott seems to have seen it as nearly empty in 1952, so perhaps is excited about seeing it half full; Saith and Tankha come in in 1970 with no past reference point, with different imaginations, and see it (rather more than) half empty. But beyond the immediate explanation, the difficulty lies in the often problematic interpretation of the detailed empirical evidence cited in support of the general conclusion of "a generation of change". The rush to judgement sits uncomfortably with the meticulousness with which the photographic archive is mined for comparative pairings of images.

Marriott's remarkably positive soundings were disseminated with alacrity to the wider community in the form of an article in SPAN,¹⁴ the glossy news and public relations magazine of the United States Information Service (USIS) put out by the American embassy, as well as a radio talk on All India Radio.¹⁵

3.3 A Differing Opinion: Saith and Tankha, 1969–70

Ajay Tankha and I conducted the first round of our village survey in Parhil gathering data for 1969–70. This was not so far apart in time from McKim Marriott's second Kishan Garhi study visit of 1968. As such, one could have a reasonable expectation that we might be viewing a village scenario that had not changed significantly from what he had seen. The differences between what we saw, then, would arise largely from what we chose to see, and our different ways of seeing. In making any such comparison, whether directly or implicitly, another factor needs to be borne in mind: we were seeing the village for the first time, without any comparative reference point against which to calibrate what we were seeing; whereas Marriott was revisiting the village in 1968 and therefore was re-viewing it against his recorded and recalled realities of the village as it might have been in 1950–52. We were considering one frame, one image; he was comparing two photographs. While we were assessing our data and information in independent, absolute terms, Marriott would be viewing the findings of his second round in relative terms that would highlight aspects of change.

¹⁴ The SPAN article (Marriott n.d.2) and the transcript of the AIR programme (Marriott n.d.1), though not any statistical or other evidence, were available to us before our entry into the village in 1970; both commentaries date from 1968–1970 years.

¹⁵ Also pertinent to mention here is the general scepticism, even acute mistrust, of US academic interventions in the politically turbo charged climate in India in that time frame; see, for instance, the issue of *Seminar* on Academic Colonialism in December 1968.

For a traditional village supposedly in a perpetual, if not eternal, “static equilibrium”, a lapse of 18 years might not count for much.

But the interim years had not been without event: the years immediately after Independence saw continuing land reforms inside the village, and the launching of significant development plans in the industrial sphere; and importantly, the introduction of the Green Revolution into the countryside. The new agricultural technologies were trialled in selected districts, and Aligarh, in which Parhil falls, was the one selected from Uttar Pradesh. This would imply strong technological and related stimuli potentially inducing rapid change.

So, in 1970, we did not find agricultural or technological stagnation; if anything, it was quite the opposite.

“Parhil displays all the outward manifestations of the so-called ‘green revolution’ – tubewells, tractors, new seeds, fertiliser, etc. The fact that it is one of the interior villages in the region does not seem to have stifled the adoption of the new technology” (Saith and Tankha 1972b, p. 713).

So, Marriott’s positive observations regarding the adoption of new technologies might have astonished him in view of his presumption of “static equilibrium”; but they came as no surprise to us.

The main difficulty with Marriott’s interpretation lay in his assessment that the change generated by the Green Revolution was generally economically positive and socially harmonious, that it had stimulated village institutions into cooperative political action and investing in collective public projects. It paid little or no attention to the extreme inequalities in the landowning structure, to the acute degrees of social exclusion and powerlessness, and to other access constraints that effectively shut the landless and near-landless poor households from the gains accruing from the technology, or from the subsidisation of it by the government credit institutions. Trickle down was expected to happen, supported by piecemeal evidence without looking at the totalities, thereby conveying an impression of a win-win scenario. Implicitly, all village households are expected to resemble the average, or representative farmer household, as in the stylised scenario underlying Schultz’s “peasants are poor but efficient” thesis in *Transforming Traditional Agriculture* (1964). One difficulty with Marriott’s rendition is the lack of emphasis on the near extreme degrees of initial inequality in the ownership of resources and productive assets. Recognising this more consistently could have qualified the rather hastily arrived at bottom lines at village level; and perhaps also induced a more careful interrogation of the “trickle down” notion implicit in the descriptions.

In view of Marriott’s deduction that “what has happened in the village ... was not exceptional”, one is left puzzled by the gap between his upbeat optimism and the seemingly wide consensus of pessimism and disappointment expressed (on the pace of agricultural progress) by various categories of external researchers and observers as reported by Marriott himself, with regard to the success of this early thrust phase of the Green Revolution. In the absence of hard statistics presented by Marriott, especially on various measurables, one can resolve this disagreement through different assumptions. First, the pessimists were right, and Marriott overstates the degree of improvement, perhaps in the euphoria of seeing things

much better than his original dire doomsday expectations; second, that there were indeed significant improvements in many spheres, but there were still sufficient shortfalls in key areas, enough to generate and justify the stance of the critics and the pessimists; or third, that these early pronouncements and quick interpretations from Marriott were possibly somewhat unbalanced and premature and a tinge ideological, perhaps coloured by the agenda of the larger American project to find a technological solution to a deepening agrarian crisis.

In view of the very limited exposure to Marriott's "empirical" evidence, it is neither appropriate nor viable to attempt a critical assessment. That said, on a range of specific issues, these positive interpretations can be usefully set alongside some differing, if not conflicting, statistics and interpretations generated by the more or less contemporaneous survey by Saith and Tankha for 1969–70. Only two illustrative examples are provided below, relating to shop keeping and to education.

3.3.1 Shops and trade

Marriott (1972, p. 18) says of 1952: "villagers had little cash or grain to trade, so that only two small shops existed with very little to sell, other than salt, pepper, matches, country cigarettes, local grain in season, rarely other foodstuffs"; the annotation for 1968 reads: "Six shops have opened in the village, each stocked with dozens of imported items – many more spices, medicines, herbs, vegetables, etc. Most villagers can now afford to buy these new things." He clearly interprets the increase in numbers since 1950 as a sign of rising prosperity. True as that might be, there is more to the story than this quick conflation.

Soon after in 1970, we saw the same phenomenon in a rather different perspective. Indeed, it is worth reproducing the discussion *in extenso*.

"There are 12 shops in the village as against four a few years ago. For a village of 185 households this appears to be an abnormally high figure. Some of the increase can be explained away by the increases in the volume of trade on account of the increase in the population of the village; and some again, by the increasing prosperity of certain sections of the village community. However, there seems to be a particular reason for the increase in the *number* (italics in original) of shops. Our interpretation is that households which cannot for particular reasons enter other occupations, find even the low profit margins in shop keeping attractive enough to effect an entry into the occupation. Further, shop keeping is peculiarly vulnerable to this tendency because it is the least exacting of all the occupations from the point of view of entry conditions. All you need is some unemployed female or child labour and some working capital, which can be borrowed from the village moneylender. Thus, a shop might be set up temporarily for a few months when the household is unemployed, and be given up when better employment opportunities present themselves. Explicably then, it is usual to find shop keeping to be only one of several activities of the households involved. It must also be clear by now that the expansion in the number of shops in a village does not necessarily reflect prosperity – and certainly not in Parhill" (Saith and Tankha 1972b, p. 717).

This contemporary description is at odds with Marriott's reading; one is also puzzled by the reference to stocks of "dozens of imported items", especially if these were imported from sources beyond Aligarh.

3.3.2 Education

The progress of education provides another pertinent case to consider. In 1951, there were few evidence of girls even in elementary schools, which were mostly attended by boys from wealthier upper-caste families "who were often bored", and "rarely did anyone finish high school"; "school seemed to prepare students only to be schoolteachers and clerks" – though how this would happen if nobody finished school remains unresolved. In 1968, school participation is much more widespread, and "youngsters now see school as leading to exciting jobs using the new technology; these boys are wearing goggles, thinking of becoming astronauts"; "one rich kid has an MS in chemistry and hopes to do a PhD abroad" (Marriott 1972, p. 23–24). Earlier, schooling created a status and aversion to working on the family land; "in 1969, working on the land with a new technology is thought to be a profitable way of applying one's learning" (Marriott 1972, p. 10).

Our statistical evidence from 1969–70 provides some grounds for reflection. We found that the average years of schooling was 1.95 years, for males it was 3.05, and for girls, 0.63 years; there were three households, of a total of 185, where a member had an educational level of more than 12 years (Saith and Tankha 1992, Table 1). These are hardly numbers that indicate an educational revolution, regardless of wearing goggles, wanting to be an astronaut or one person (not recorded in 1970) wishing to do a PhD abroad. For all accounts, these numbers are suggestive of an utterly pathetic educational profile; and so indeed it seemed to us in the village in 1970. If one were to factor in the acute inequalities prevalent in the village, the level of educational attainment for the majority of the landless and land-poor households would be abysmal. The average figure for girls, 0.63 school years, really says that apart from a handful of girls who went to school for a few years, the rest were really illiterate; so what if three girls were found by Marriott (1972, p. 23) to be in high school in 1968. What positives can one really take from these new outliers – with an overall profile as bad as the one prevailing all of two full school-cycles ago. Marriott's positive spin on education seems to be just that, and suggests that the source of his optimism in this domain might have been due to focussing on the high-performing outlier exceptions from some wealthy households.

Beyond these examples, there could be serious differences with regard to the positive, upbeat descriptions and interpretations Marriott places on the issues to do with land and landlessness; with employment and migration; and with regard to gender.

3.4 From Transformation to Stasis? Saith and Tankha 1970, 1987

It is time to take a look into the next period, the high tide of the Green Revolution: 1970–87. In doing so, it should be recalled that Aligarh was one of the nation-wide districts selected for the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme (IADP),

indeed the only one from Uttar Pradesh.¹⁶ So it had had the benefit of attention of the promoters of the Green Revolution. It is also a district of the fertile doab region, lying in the fork between the Ganga and Yamuna. It should also be noted that during this period, credit and capital for agriculture were very heavily subsidised, sometimes with near-zero or even negative real rates of interest. How did the village fare? Did it live up to the sanguine of Marriott? Did it belie the more qualified observations from Saith and Tankha? We will limit ourselves to just a few summary statistics to capture the essentials of the overall outcome.

3.4.1 *Green revolution in the village: running to stay still, or falling behind?*

Over the 18-year period, the population of the village increased by 37 per cent; the sex ratio “improved” from 823 to 894 though much of this could be attributed to the emigration of village males; the dependency ratio rose slightly from 0.92 to 1.06, and the household size from 5.98 to 6.06. The total land owned by village households dropped by 17 per cent, while the number of households rose by 35.1 per cent; land owned per capita dropped by 37 per cent.

Mechanisation proceeded apace, with the number of tubewells increasing from 13 in 1970 to 31 in 1987, or to 46 if diesel borewells were included – a substantial rise. The number of tractors rose from three to five. The cropping pattern shifted further in favour of High Yielding Variety (HYV) wheat and sugarcane; and the gross value of agricultural output per sown bigha rose by 74 per cent over the period. Wheat yields rose annually by 3.00 per cent, sugarcane by 2.65 per cent, and cotton by 2.97 per cent; milch animals were 1.02 heads per household and rose to 1.14.

The indices all seem in positive territory, but a closer scrutiny reveals some uneasy facts.

The gross value of agricultural output per head, taken at constant 1970 prices using the UP rural consumer price index as a deflator, actually dropped by 1.5 per cent per year, suggesting that any slight per capita per year gains made were more than washed away by deteriorating inter-sector terms of trade. However, even without this effect, the trends point to a very marginal increase on a per capita basis. Given that the richer farmers, with their tubewells and tractors, and with access to easy and cheap credit, would display higher levels of input application, it would suggest that a very significant percentage of landowning households would have experienced a drop much greater than the average per annum fall of 1.5 per cent. Of course, this only reflects the gross revenue from agriculture. But one would also expect some diminishing returns to inputs, so that the rate of net increase could be expected to be lower. This suggests that landowning households experienced perceptible deterioration in their ability to maintain their incomes from their land, the expectations of the Green Revolution notwithstanding; and this despite there

¹⁶ For a detailed statistical study of the impact of IADP practices on changes in yield and incomes for different crops, see Brown (1971). Aligarh exhibits a performance for increases in wheat yields that is much inferior to Ludhiana – the IADP district from Punjab – but one that is superior to all but two of the other UP districts. The impact on increases in per acre income on account of the increase in wheat yields, however, appears to be modest. (cf Tables A-23, A-26b).

being a significant out-migration from the village during this period. Increasing reliance would then have to be placed on non-agricultural sources of income. And indeed, that is what the other data reveal, though here too the story is mixed, and the bottom line somewhat discouraging.

Consider next the position of agricultural labour, which takes several forms, with declines in some, such as permanent farm servants, and increases in others, such as contract labour. The total number of days of contract and casual hired agricultural labour increased by only 0.2 per cent per annum, and amount to a little over 100 days per year per household involved in hired agricultural labour. Significantly, there were no threshers in 1970, but there were 17 in 1987.

“It is reasonable to conclude that there has been a considerable push factor operative on rural labour as far as agriculture is concerned. This has applied to different extents and in different ways to virtually all categories of village households” (Saith and Tankha 1992, p. 9).

Evidence (presented in Saith and Tankha 1992) on non-agricultural occupations shows that there were three occupations which registered increases: services outside the village; brick-kiln related employment; and band-playing, a niche village occupation with idiosyncratic origins that has flourished in recent times. Virtually all other occupations have been in some form of decline. The *jajmani* trades have seriously atrophied both from the demand and supply sides of the equation; various village based petty production have suffered, as have other local services under severe competition from the external world whose entry to the village has been greatly facilitated by the new link road to the road head township. This has also negatively impacted the work of the *dhobi* and the *kumhar*. One could speak of a deindustrialisation of the village, or rather to the reduction of village production of goods and services increasingly and exclusively to the category of non-tradeables. Twelve of the 16 complete households that have migrated out of the village since 1970 were in the poor non-peasant category. The overall conclusion is one of atrophy:

“over the 17-year period, the village displays a much increased degree of incorporation with the wider regional economy. The village itself has become much less important as an economic arena where the residents, especially the land-scarce households seek or obtain their employment and earn their income entitlements. To this extent, the self-provisioning capacity of the village, which obviously was never complete, has weakened, and it has come to be increasingly dependent on the linkages with the external economy” (Saith and Tankha 1992, p. 14).

What is necessary also to note is that the outflow of resources is not just surplus labour and declining traditional occupations and services, but also includes upper end workers and capital from the richer households who prefer to develop lines of livelihoods in towns and cities, as they experience diminishing interests and prospects within the village.¹⁷ Overall, then, in 1987, the village seemed to be

¹⁷ This also points to the impossibility of conducting a complete enquiry by limiting oneself to the boundaries of the village, or to those who are normally resident in it, and confronts the researcher with the

haemorrhaging in terms of labour, capital and skills, though there were specific groupings, such as the Bagheles, who were making good and strengthening their economic, social and political base in the village, continuing from trends noted earlier by Marriott.

3.4.2 *Not so green?*

While Marriott (1972) records the spread of modern tools and machines unreservedly as positive developments towards rural modernisation, Saith and Tankha (1972b, p. 722) express concern about the collective inefficiency of such mechanisation, especially citing overinvestment in tubewells, which they attribute to the ready availability of extremely low-priced credit to the richer farmers for purchasing farm machines. Such capital subsidisation made it profitable for farmers to install tubewells on plots much smaller than the technical command area of the tubewell.

A related observation from 1970 concerns the nonchalantly wasteful use, rather abuse, of water resources: the big bore tubewell with water running free, no switching off, borewell baths as a status symbol. The heavy subsidisation of credit and capital, virtually free water, alongside the fragmented nature of the structure of holdings, induced much overinvestment in tubewells and ground water extraction.

Further, Saith and Tankha, in 1972, might have been one of the earliest to record the ecological stresses generated by the new chemicalisation of cultivation, with the HYV-NPK combinations of the Green Revolution. For Parhil, we discovered an unusual form of share-tenancy involving poor peasants taking in land from large landowners who were the more intensive users of the new technology.

“It is normal practice for large owner of land to give out a small fraction of their land for share-cropping on the condition that it be fertilised only by farmyard manure, as it is widely believed that such a rest from chemical fertilisers is necessary for the soil to recoup its fertility” (Saith and Tankha 1972b, p. 718).

Clearly, local cultivators had generated this indigenous knowledge, quite accurately as was subsequently established by “modern science”, after the lapse of less than a decade. There is no way that such an insight could have been obtained except directly through investigative fieldwork.

By 1987, though the size distribution of holdings had flattened out noticeably under the pressure of subdivision, the number of tubewells had more than doubled, from 13 to 31. Saith and Tankha (1992, p. 8, footnote 12) significantly note,

“that from a social point of view, the new situation reflects a heavy overinvestment irrigation, made possible by the under-pricing of capital, as well as the level and specific methods of subsidisation of electricity prices for

Footnote 17 continued

challenge, not easily met, of tracking those that have “left” the village. It also emphasises the need to analyse agrarian differentiation within a wider rubric that articulates these village processes with the wider, external economy of the region.

agricultural uses. The water table has dropped in this region, and several wells have dried up, or have had to be deepened; borings of new tubewells have to go far deeper than before. The ‘improvement’ in irrigation volumes is therefore not without cost, and this is borne by a much wider group than the owner-cum-user beneficiaries of the ‘improvement’.

Therefore, there should be no surprise at the subsequent discovery of serious stress on water resources and a falling water table in the region.¹⁸

3.4.3 Caste and conflict

We found the village to be a cantankerous, conflictual place, resonating far more with Marriott’s original description of 1950–52 than with his later positive discoveries in 1968. A 21x21 inter-caste commensality matrix that I did in 1987 confirmed this. The village had no elected political leader; this was perceived to weaken its position vis-à-vis the district government administration, e.g., in relation to its pecking order or prioritisation in government funds, schemes and infrastructure. This opened the strategic space for the political aspirations of dynamic, economically successful, “well-behaved” individuals, especially younger ones without the heavy baggage of past cumulative inter-personal tensions. The rising role of the “secular” state, i.e., district bureaucracy, as well as local-level political formations form potential partners linking up for mutual advantage. The steady assertion and rise of the Baghele caste group provide an illustration of this relatively new phenomenon. However, the self-promotion of a few young *Turks* could not overturn the frictions, factions and fractions in the social foundations of the village. Village level “civil society” stood out as a vacant associational, organisational or political space. All this inter-caste and group bickering notwithstanding, in economic transactions, there was virtually no evidence of caste playing a role in the selection of other transacting parties for most economic exchanges.

Marriott (1968) analyses the interactions of caste groups in Parhil in 1951–52, taking “the case of the climbing Bagheles, former goatherds” (Marriott Slideshow, 1972, p. 80). Saith and Tankha also refer to the rising aspirations of the Baghele, but also provide evidence of the violent conflicts that ensued from it.

“Village frictions seem to have progressed from bickering over status and esteem to violence over power and control. Elections to the *gram panchayat* were held in 1988 in the village. However, following the campaign for the election of representatives for the two places reserved for women, there were violent clashes between Brahmins and Bagheles, and castes supporting their

¹⁸ A scientific report on the status of ground water resources in Aligarh District for 2008–09 confirms that “ground water levels in the district have declined very fast and it is strongly recommended that exploitation of ground water through private and shallow tubewells should be minimized... The declining water levels have cause an adverse effect on the ecological balance as minor drainage ways which used to have water are now almost dry. This obviously is the result of massive ground water exploitation for irrigations as well as for industrial needs. Dugwells have become defunct due to lowering of water table” (Kumar n.d., 21) Between 1998 and 2007, an annual rise in the water table was observed in 2 of the 13 monitoring dugwells in the district, where the maximum rise was 0.38 m.; the other 11 wells experienced a decline, where the maximum decline was 0.22 m. (Kumar n.d., 16).

respective candidates. This resulted in the death of one person, bullet injuries to several others and large-scale arrests including those of many prominent persons of the village. This is symptomatic of the underlying tensions building up between the dominant castes – whose position has been deteriorating in relative terms – and the newly emerging ones such as the Bagheles who feel the time might be ripe to express their economic strength in the political and social sphere as well. It is worth mentioning that this tussle occurred prior to the expectation of panchayats becoming recipients and controllers of significant governmental financial resources” (Saith and Tankha 1997, footnote 4, p. 81–82).

3.4.4 *The occluded vision: gender*

A careful ILO study of 1,621 rural households in Uttar Pradesh explores the extent to which the reported low labour force participation rates for women could be due to bad questionnaires, ambiguous or arbitrary labour force definitions, biases on account of the gender of male proxy respondents, or biases arising from the gender of the interviewer. The findings were telling:

“Women were found to be extremely active in the sample area. Approximately 90% of the sample women were reported to be in the labour force based on internationally accepted recommendations for defining labour force activity, with over 10% engaged in wage employment and over 1/3 in activities where monetary transactions took place. Typically, women were engaged in several different types of labour force activities, implying that it is not possible to understand or measure the extent of female labour force activity in rural India without accounting for women’s multiple and fragmented activity patterns.” (Anker *et al.* 1988).

Questionnaire type and design were the key culprit, though the gender of the interviewer also played some part.

But there are serious hidden issues buried in shallow ground, and some quick excavations confirm the concern. Consider the sex ratio, females per 1,000 males. It stood at 823 in Parhil in 1970. There were 601 males to 505 females in the population. Village girls marry outside the village while brides for the males come in from other villages. Assuming all females and males of marriageable age do get married thus, the net effect would be to increase the number of females in Parhil, i.e., to push the sex ratio up. Generally, women live longer than men; and this effect should push the sex ratio up as well. The overall low sex ratio, 823, then could be largely attributed to sex differences in the village population in the younger years. Seen thus, one could expect a child sex ratio, or the sex ratio at birth, to be well under the overall number of 823 – clearly a worrying prospect, if this rough and ready method is used.

There were clearly many serious gender issues to dig up and research, but these were beyond our reach for a variety of reasons, not for want of interest. In Marriott too, there are many references to the lives of women, in the form of observation of rituals and practices. His positive take on some widening in the different forms of

women's visibility and expression goes rather to show how basically excluded women were from social, economic and political equality.

3.5 The Jigsaw: How Does It All Add Up

Linking the chains and bottom lines of the various studies reviewed, the story line that emerges is of a traditional village, moribund in technological and institutional terms, that receives a stimulus from some of the initiatives of institutional reform promulgated by the government, and from the new Green Revolution technology package, but where the dynamic productivity impact eroded over the subsequent period, where agriculture was unable to sustain any significant improvement in incomes, leading to increased out-migration, particularly from the traditional artisanal classes whose livelihood base could not stand up to the competition from modern substitutes in the face of changing tastes and better communications. The Indian tale up to 1987 is one of a step shift on account of the Green Revolution package, not a sustained path of growth.

4 CHINESE COMMUNE, INDIAN VILLAGE – A DIALOGUE

This section seeks a resolution to the paradox presented at the outset: how is rural China's superior performance to be explained? For this purpose, the focus here will be squarely on microcosmic comparisons of various institutional features, contrasting processes and policies in equivalent domains in the Indian village and the Chinese people's commune.

4.1 China Through Indian Eyes: From Imagining to Researching

When I started out into researching India at the end of the 1960s, China was an inspirational image for streams of young Indian radicals, but China was far away. When in the village in 1970, there was nothing to compare or contrast it with, no other reference point against which to relativise one's comprehension of village realities. But when, starting from 1979, I began to travel extensively in rural China, comparisons and contrasts with India were inescapable, and there would be a virtually continual parallel dialogue running in my mind as I delved into the novel societal and political landscape of collectivist rural China: here was Maoism in action on its home turf. Such silent conversations were a constant companion in each of the dozen and more research visits that I made after that. In 1950, India and China were credibly comparable in very many meaningful respects. But even by 1979, when I first set foot in rural China at the end of the Maoist era of high collectivism, the credible comparison had already converted into an incredible contrast. By the time Ajay Tankha and I returned to Parhil for our re-survey in 1987, I had conducted half a dozen additional study trips into rural China that threw up a continual barrage of contrasting images, veritably forcing the issue of the potentialities and constraints to progressive transformations of turgid village

realities.¹⁹ Over the years, I have tried to assemble and analyse my cumulative experience of periodic field research on rural China in itself, but then also within a comparative framework involving primarily India (Saith 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2012).²⁰ It is often through the method of comparison that one can comprehend, calibrate and dissect, and so discover additional insights into one's field of study.

The methodological challenges when researching rural China in the collectivist period were very different from those encountered when studying the village in rural India, though I will not take these up here in any detail.

The first issue worth mentioning is the mismatch between the meanings of concepts as they are defined in the researcher's mind, or questionnaire, and as heard and understood by the villager from whom a response is sought. Problems arise from multiple directions, as mentioned earlier. Many of these issues did not really apply to the exercise of field research in rural communes for the reason that there was a virtually uniform constitutional template that defined the levels, structures, responsibilities, entitlements and claims, pattern of transactions and flows, that covered all production, investment and distribution activities. At the end of the day, all activities of each level of each commune were set in a common accounting framework using the same definitions. Thus, communes could have widely diverse structural features and levels of development, but these could still be readily tracked through the accounting system of the commune. It was therefore necessary to quickly master the intricacies of this template through detailed systematic interactions.²¹

It was usually possible for me to follow my own special interest in the design and local operationalisation of China's new population policies.²²

The people's commune was the lowest level of government and therefore had various data gathering and reporting functions as part of its official tasks. These were systematically collected and maintained – and almost always made available

¹⁹ Rather later, when writing (Saith 2008b) about some aspects of Joan Robinson's lifelong engagement with India, I discovered her saying: "when I was in China and Korea, I was thinking often of India" (Robinson 1964, p.1917). A similar sentiment pervades parts of the insightful report of the Indian delegation that visited China (and Japan) to study the functioning and impact of agricultural cooperation from an Indian perspective (Government of India, 1956).

²⁰ See the references for an extensive listing of my research work on China: on population and gender Saith (1981, 1984, 1995b); on rural reforms Saith (1987, 1995a, 1995c); on macro-economic dimensions of poverty alleviation (2003a); on educational exclusion (2003b); on comparative employment programmes (2012); on collectivisation and rural industrialisation (1980, 1986, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1995a, 1995c, 2001).

²¹ This essential capacity was built in the very first research study visit in 1979, and is reported in Griffin and Saith (1981). I recall, on that visit, a timed "race" between a commune accountant using an abacus and one of our team members using an electronic calculator, to process some data to calculate the value of the workpoint in the unit. I cannot remember who won, or whether there was convergence in the outcome, but it was a delightful exercise with learning laced with laughter.

²² The findings of these investigations are reported in Saith (1981) and Saith (1984). In this context, it was striking that an Indian male could have access to women in various communes and households to probe their perspectives and experience of this very new draconian policy; this access was sometimes, but not always, mediated by the women's leader of the team; there were few if any taboos to the range of topics covered. It would be impossible to contemplate such an exercise in rural India, and least of all in the Indian village studied.

upon request. All initial orientation meetings at communes featured statistical introductions by leaders and accountants, using well-thumbed dog-eared pocket notebooks and folios containing all relevant statistical materials. This applied at the level of the commune, brigade as well as the production team. Planning, direction, accounting and accountability were all strongly data centric. “Seek truth from facts” was a popular Maoist dictum, and we used it fully to request specific detailed data on a wide range of topics. Numerical literacy was generally very much part of peasant discourse, particularly in the more developed units. This well-structured and managed system broke down after the reforms: data was thought to be unnecessary, costly to collect, and in any case it was seldom used. Access for us depended on the local leader, and I can recall situations where donations were obliquely, or sometimes fairly overtly, requested in exchange for data, usually in county towns in the 1990s.

Indeed, we sometimes encountered “models” visited by other delegations and research groups, as for instance, Wu Gong Production Brigade in Hebei Province. We did not object, so long as these were the exception and not the rule. It was impossible to conceal the “model” status of the unit. In turn, we took that as a special opportunity to analyse first-hand in detail the construction, functioning and interpretation of the model, and its role in communicating to outsiders desirable key features of the process of rural development. That was, in itself, valuable knowledge.

As a rule, for any unit visited, we were able to calibrate its overall level by scaling it against the distribution at higher levels. The per capita income of a production team could be calibrated against the range for all the teams of the brigade, and likewise of the brigade against the overall commune. We could then know what part of the distribution we were dealing with. Selections of units to be visited were made after consultation, to match our research requests, as far as practicable.

Since our focus was strongly on the mechanics and internal functioning of the people’s commune, and its articulation with higher levels, every visit, whether to a rich or to a poor commune, yielded incremental information which added to our understanding of how policy worked in diverse contexts and at different levels of development. Through such itinerant research forays, it became possible to construct a reliable identikit sketch of the core development, accumulation and redistribution mechanisms embedded in the structure of the people’s commune; such an abstract understanding could then frame research engagements in specific communes and collective enterprises. Needless to say, the abstract template was constantly under revision, and always remained a work in progress, as the field regularly threw up novelties and surprises.

Detailed statistics – which had to be internally consistent – were the basis on which income distribution was done within units; it would be impossible for a commune’s statistical system to be collectively deceitful or fraudulent. Such apprehensions could not therefore carry much credibility, though there could always be flexible spaces in the matter of interpretation, and also with regard to other data that could not be so verified.

In general, there were few zones of silence or exclusion and few taboo subjects that could not be addressed within an appropriate protocol. Unlike rural India, there were no serious social exclusion issues to tackle within units, and though there were few female leaders, apart from the mandatory women's leader in the unit's leadership committee, women were not structurally invisible to outsider males as in village India.

4.2 Microcosmic Institutional Comparisons

I will now focus on the salience of the institutional dimension²³ and highlight its role in accounting for the dramatic systemic changes observed in the countryside in that period.

In China, the institutional framework has formed not a structural constraint, but a policy amenable instrumental catalyst of the development strategy. Traditional institutional configurations have been swept aside; new ones designed and constructed in acutely compressed timeframes, and then again dumped for yet other institutional templates deemed more appropriate for the national development strategy. In its historic zigzag pattern, socialist China smashed the shackles of old feudalism. Merely a generation later, many might see the historical irony of socialism serving as the pioneer of capitalism in China, and wonder about the headlong transition from socialism to its anti-thesis. How could the same country, the same people, offer such massive contrasts within a generation? How would one explain this structural and ideological reversal? It is arguable though that what appears as a tectonic upheaval only constitutes a systemic realignment, another phase in the perennial Chinese search for institutions and arrangements that generate new potential sources of accumulation and growth, irrespective of the ideological lexicon of the time. The continuity is provided by the underlying foundational consensus and motivation to achieve sustained material prosperity, cultural esteem, economic power and political ascendancy on a regional and global stage.

It is my contention that the rural institutional factor constitutes the heart of the difference. Rural institutions constituted a fundamental constraint in the Indian case, whereas in rural China, the institutional framework was repeatedly designed and redesigned, partially or virtually in its entirety, as an instrumental policy variable to serve the objectives of rural accumulation and egalitarian development. I will support this strong hypothesis through a string of stylised binary comparisons between the two countries. For India, the characterisations reflect the realities of the studied village, more generally of agriculture in Uttar Pradesh and various other

²³ The "institutional dimension" is understood here in its broadest interpretation covering personal, commercial and public domains, embracing value, belief and faith systems, received and mediated norms and notions underlying individual and group behaviour; lived culture, civil constitutional codes, penal systems, lived culture and actually practised religion; the rules of the game and power structures regulating access to and control over resources; all these as embedded in organisational forms and social structures, relations and networks such as family, marriage, households, communities, occupational, class, caste and ethnic constituencies, neighbourhoods and other collectivities, including notions of nation and national belonging.

parts of rural India. For China, the features described reflect the observed realities in various rural Chinese communes studied on various visits.²⁴

4.2.1 *Land*

India displays a typical, inequitable land ownership distribution with several negative features. First, land is scarce; but not for everyone, since there is acute inequality of ownership. In Parhil in 1970, the top 10 per cent of the households owned about half the village land; at the other end, more than 50 per cent of the households owned no land at all. Second, most of the land was held in small holdings. Third, this problem was accentuated dramatically by the fragmentation of holdings, whereby a household's owned land was held in several plots of different size or of different qualities, and in different locations in the village. Fourth, with each passing generation, land holdings were being subdivided between the male heirs, further disaggregating the ownership structure. Fifth, in the absence of alternatives, land was also a symbolic marker of prestige, but it also ensured survival, and served as a store of asset value. Sixth, there was virtually no market for outright land sales in the village. Finally, some of the size aspects of the ownership could be modified through tenancy arrangements, but only up to a point. So the overall land structure was extremely exclusionary and also acted a structural constraint to any technological change that incorporated significant scale economies.

In contrast, all land was collectively owned by the households comprising a production team which was the lowest accounting and organisational level in rural China. At a stroke, this does away with the above disadvantages, even though the overall scarcity of arable land was more acute in rural China than in rural India.²⁵

4.2.2 *Labour and employment*

All children were expected to be at school till 16 years in age, though they would help with field work in busy seasons. At 16, as a rule, they all became formal members of the labour force of the production team. This meant that they were entitled to share the jobs available, and would be assigned work against which they would accumulate work points according to prescribed rates for different categories of workers. The common value of a work point, at which all workers' incomes were calculated, was determined by the overall distributable agricultural net income earned collectively by the team over the year. In this way, full access to employment was guaranteed. Tasks were allocated to workers by the leadership of the production team.

²⁴ For a more detailed analysis of specific units in different provinces, see Saith (1980), Saith and Griffin (1981) and Saith (1995a).

²⁵ The potential of collective land arrangements for egalitarian modernisation was noted early by Joan Robinson (1979, p. 135, cited in Saith 2008a, b, p. 736 n14): "Some kind of cooperative or collective property in land and in means of production is necessary to provide a frame in which modernisation can go on without polarisation between wealth and misery which it is bringing about all over the Third World today".

In the Indian village in 1970, education levels were abysmal and child labour was commonplace. The average years of schooling for the population were 1.95, and one-third that for females.

4.2.3 Local infrastructure development

In the Indian case, in sharp contrast, there were virtually no signs of local infrastructural development, be it roads or electrification, a local health station or school; this, in a village in the more developed, *doaba* region of the relatively more developed region of Uttar Pradesh, in one of the districts where the IADP programme was being piloted.

On the Chinese side, the situation in 1950 might well have been very similar, but it had transformed by 1970, through the use of the Maoist device of 'labour accumulation', whereby peasant labour that was unutilised in the off-season was intensively used to generate local infrastructural assets, ranging from tree planting, land levelling, rationalising and developing irrigation, lining of local water bodies to convert to fish ponds, roads, school buildings, drainage, small bridge building or whatever other projects were deemed locally appropriate by the commune and higher level leadership. This happened in each commune, and the collective impact was highly significant, including various multipliers on account of the forward and backward linkages of these activities; in specific, there was a notable impact on cropping intensity, on cropping patterns and on crop yields.

Elsewhere, I have made a comparative analysis of the operation and impact of Maoist labour accumulation within the Chinese rural collective framework, and the function of NREGA in rural India after 2005 under India's neoliberal policy regime and within the extant agrarian structural and institutional framework marked by a high level of landlessness and the subdivision and fragmentation of land ownership. The balance sheet comes out overwhelmingly in favour of the Chinese collective where such interventions were highly productivist and had a very substantial impact on rural growth, unlike India, where NREGA has lapsed into a default mode where it functions really as a provider of some employment without worrying overly about the productivity of such work and investment. The weaknesses arise primarily from the dysfunctional contractual arrangements under which these schemes are conducted. On the other hand, in the Chinese collective, there was an inbuilt incentive for households to offer more labour on these schemes in order to increase their income entitlements; indeed, if a household did not offer labour (though this was not really normal), its income would be further reduced on account of the devaluation of the value of the work point on account of the additional labour days invested by other participating households.²⁶ Further, such infrastructure development depended in India on externally financed projects initiated from higher levels of government which had their own budgetary constraints;²⁷ in contrast, in rural

²⁶ For a detailed analysis, see Saith (2012).

²⁷ "It is technically possible, as the Chinese have shown, to make good use of the idle time of the cultivators (once they have enough to eat all the year round) to improve irrigation, check erosion, build roads and so on, but individual property in land is an impediment to such schemes because of the problem

China, most of these schemes were self-financing, since the labour component, which constituted the overwhelmingly large share of the cost, was only really paid nominally during the construction phase of the scheme, and obtained its augmented returns only after the investment came on line with its positive impact on agricultural productivity.

4.2.4 *Mechanisation and displacement*

There are three comparisons of significance here. First, the fragmented structure of landholdings was an obstacle to technological change across the board. Second, the constraints of structure, combined with credit subsidisation for larger farmers, led to substantial overinvestment in tubewells that was economically wasteful and ecologically damaging. Third, all such mechanisation was labour displacing, and this affected the livelihoods of the poorer sections of the village.

In contrast, the Chinese commune allowed for a more rational use of machines with heavy economies of scale, and these could be much more economically utilised under collectively planned cultivation, which also pre-empted inter-farmer conflicts over water use. And labour displaced was reallocated other useful tasks, and thus the displacement effect was nullified.

4.2.5 *Migration*

While migration of labour, and the flight of capital, are inherent to the agrarian differentiation processes in rural India, and clearly in evidence in the study village, the situation in collectivist China was sharply different. Rural labour had a rural residential and work registration, the *hukou*. This prevented them from migrating to the city to live or to work there; their entitlements were all linked to their *hukou*, and so voluntary or spontaneous migration was entirely ruled out. As such, the Chinese model was one of place development; it brought and generated development to where peasants lived, viz., to the rural people's commune. So communes had to find solutions for all, including "surplus" labour, with no chance that the scale of the problem would be reduced through voluntary rural–urban migration to the cities. For the period under review, this remained the central policy in China.

4.2.6 *Rural industrialisation*

Perhaps the most powerful accumulation and transformative device embedded in the structure of the people's commune was rural industrialisation. Production teams (PTs) owned only small repair workshops, or maintain a small building and transportation team. Workers in these were from the team and earned work points like team households working on the land. Production brigades (PBs) owned a variety of small-scale industrial enterprises linked to internal or external demand.

Footnote 27 continued

of who is to get the benefit from them" (Robinson and Eatwell, 1973, p. 328, cited in Saith 2008, p. 739 n16).

Here, workers were drawn from the constituent PTs of this PB, and generally (during the reference period), received work points for a day's work. These work points were encashed back in their parent PTs. A similar arrangement applied to the level of the people's commune (PC), where the enterprises were more in number, larger in scale and more modern. PBs and the PC usually had no agricultural activities apart from specialised seed farms. The key accumulation device here was the wage payment system: all peasant workers in the rural enterprises of the PBs and the PC received their payment in work points, the value of which structurally linked it with the average consumption level of the PT households. So workers effectively received 'wages' equal to the average consumption of peasants – just as in the Lewis model. Given that rural enterprises were usually very profitable, this automatically implied that substantial enterprise surpluses built up at the level of the PB that owned the enterprise. Over time, this made the rural industrial sector a powerful dynamic engine of accumulation and development within the commune.

These surpluses potentially had hugely consequential development uses. Approximately about 40 per cent of the surplus would be kept back for expanding the industrial portfolio of the PB; another 40 per cent was generally reserved for investment in various agricultural and infrastructural activities within the PTs of the PB, focussing especially the less developed parts of the PB and its agricultural operations. This, again had a significant impact on agricultural productivity and was also inherently redistributive in favour of the poorer PTs of the brigade. Finally, the remaining 20 per cent was transferred to the higher PC level for expanding the industrial and related activities at that higher level of the people's commune. Over time, therefore, the rural industrial sector of the commune served as a transformative device through its massive potential for generating accumulation within the rural sector. It also retained, indeed, strengthened the linkages between agriculture and industry, redistributed income towards the poorer units, generated local industrial skills, often fungible within the commune, and supported general infrastructural development, including social services in education, health, sanitation, transportation, etc. The twin engines of accumulation with the commune, viz., rural industrialisation and labour accumulation, laid the foundations of Chinese rural transformation during the 1962–78 period and provided the platform for the subsequent phase of rapid national economic growth. Indeed, in its first post reform phase, it was the rural industrial sector that took the lead in the growth process, consistently posting the highest growth rates.

This needs to be compared with the ubiquitous pattern of deindustrialisation that occurs in Indian villages – the separation of agriculture from industry, the loss of skills to the urban sector, the capture and draining away of profits by entrepreneurs with private priorities for their utilisation elsewhere, and their very weak linkages with village life. These effects were confirmed for the study village earlier.

Two other features of Chinese rural industrialisation of that period carry special relevance. First, the process of the decay and deindustrialisation of rural crafts and industries observed in Indian villages was pre-empted in the Chinese commune by the policy of assembling all individual crafts, eg., weaving, pottery, or bamboo-working, into common cooperative workshops; these collectives of artisans were then rationalised and modernised in their production methods, product range and

markets. If that meant a fewer number of artisans, there was collective peasant agriculture or other industrial activities in which those so displaced could work and claim their entitlements. The second concerns the ease with which farmland could be transferred to industrial uses on account of the fact that both belonged to the same set of shareholders, and that displaced peasants would retain their work entitlements based on an equal membership in the team, brigade or commune.

4.2.7 Purity, dignity, taboos

In sharp contrast to the Indian scenario, there are few equivalent taboos with regard to diet with nutrition taking precedence; none of the caste-based mumbo-jumbo about “pure” and “impure” with hygiene and equality taking precedence; no qualms about manual labour.

4.2.8 Gender

Here, I limit myself to a single instructive comparison.

McKim Marriott, writing perhaps his very first paper on Kishan Garhi after his first round of fieldwork, commented on patrilocal marriage customs, and referred to dowry and subsequent flows of gifts to the girl’s new family as “bribes” to ensure her safety and well-being. Further:

“the economic effects of this patterning of marriage are great. Not only are marriage expenses thus kept high, but quantities of goods follow marriage in later years by the same non-rational path. One-third of all milk animals, are given and an equally large proportion of cash is lent to marital relatives. Perhaps one quarter of all debt is to fulfil marriage demands. The persistence and vigour of such a structuring of marriage puts limits on the degree to which a village can manage its economic affairs as a local unit” (Marriott 1952a, p. 871).

Old China had traditional dowry customs²⁸ rather like India’s, but these all nearly disappeared with the Revolution. So there was no question of any rural household getting into debt in order to service a girl’s dowry, or for the expenses of associated with births and deaths. So whether parents have male or female child does not have any significant differential pecuniary or resource implications. But there persists the matter of old-age care, which remains ultimately the legal obligation of children. Even in traditional China, there was a pragmatic flexibility to accommodate such vital needs. Fei Hsiao Tung (1983, p. 54–55), in writing about his research village in 1936, records that

“in case a family has no sons, an accepted solution is to bring an adopted son-in-law into the family, usually from a very poor family or one with several sons. Once this agreement has been made between the two families, the

²⁸ See Fei (1939), read alongside Tawney (1932). Celarent (2013a) offers an insightful commentary on Fei (1939).

wedding ceremony will take place in the girl's house and the husband will live in his wife's house with his wife's parents."

This practice was retained in socialist China, and had particular salience in the context of the limitations placed on the size of the family. So long as there were two children allowed, there would generally be this possibility. But with the harder imposition of the one-child rule, such a practice could not be taken recourse to. In fact, the widespread problem was that a young married couple would be burdened with the care of two sets of parents. This was one of the additional pressure points that intensified the inherited behavioural feature of son preference. In the new era of the rediscovery of tradition, some of the old burdensome lifecycle rituals and practices have made a prominent return, though their pecuniary implications are nowhere likely to be as disruptive as in India.

The shifting locations of women in Chinese national accumulation regimes, both socialist and post-socialist, both in the public domain and in the family, about control over their work and their bodies and life trajectories, provides a fertile terrain for institutional exploration.²⁹

4.2.9 *Information flows and governance*

Being the lowest level of government, where leadership was in the hands mostly of the Communist Party, the commune was part of a vertical structure of continuous flows from the central government, travelling through the provincial and county levels. This facilitated a remarkably responsive command structure, where instructions or guidelines from above were rapidly transmitted, reviewed, revised, finalised and disseminated on a hugely up-scaled basis. This structure facilitated political, organisational, developmental, technological and virtually all other aspects of life, with progressively greater space for local customisation the further down one travelled in this vertical structure. Direct horizontal linkages across units, however, were very weak, with all exchanges being mediated by the next higher level of responsibility. There was nothing remotely equivalent to this in the Indian case.

4.3 Chinese Masses, Indian Morasses

The key to the transformation of the Chinese peasantry in the period of high collectivism was its propelling force, the agency of the mass mobilisation mode of collective action. What explains its existence and power? I have elaborated on this elsewhere (Saith 2008a); a summary statement has to suffice.

"Several latent and active factors combined to form the preconditions for the successful exploitation of the mass mobilisation mode of transformation. First, the existence of cultural homogeneity on a near-national scale; second, a powerful sense of ownership of the state by the masses and a strong sense of identification with it; third, the mass appeal of many major rural policy interventions made by the state, such as land reforms, rural industries and rural

²⁹ I have covered some aspects of these in Saith (1981), Saith (1984) and Saith (1995b).

socio-economic security polices; fourth, an efficient organisational framework for enabling vertical two-way flows of information; fifth, a powerful, unified command structure; sixth, the use of instruments for the ideological motivation of the rural masses; finally, success itself was the lubricant for sustaining the process – the benefits of economic achievements were widely shared and there for most to experience, and this made the hard work seem right and worthwhile” (Saith 2008a, p. 744).

In typical Mao-speak one heard across the countryside till the reforms, the key lay in ‘releasing the enthusiasm of the masses’.

Perhaps nothing could be more distant than this from the realities of rural India, then or now.

Before closing this microcosmic institutional comparison, it is essential to register the demise of the powerful people’s commune. The second revolution set in motion a grand reversal of earlier institutional strategies, both in town and county. Virtually at a stroke, the communes were disbanded and the land “returned” to rural households, thus reconstituting the Chinese peasantry, albeit at that point on an extremely egalitarian basis. This heralded the immediate termination of the mass mobilisation mode of transformation. With the commune structure as a power base, the peasantry suffered a political decapitation, it became acephalous leading to the total collective disempowerment of a new ocean of atomised peasants looking for prosperity, and often for survival, as individual households within a dramatically re-ordered, decollectivised institutional framework. And step by step, virtually by stealth, the peasant households were delinked, detached, disenfranchised and disinherited from the profitable rural industrial enterprises of which they had been rightful collective owners. I have tracked this process over the decades and detailed the micro-mechanics of this quiet, yet fundamental, transition in rural China. What is remarkable is how systematically, and almost surreptitiously, it was achieved by exploiting the seemingly chaotic outcomes emerging from the initial decollectivisation. Peasants’ property rights and entitlements reverted effectively to the position they had prior to collectivisation.

This grand reversal in the countryside again demonstrates most dramatically the proposition that post-Revolution China has been able to address its institutional configurations as policy instruments, to be redesigned and recast to match the requirements of the accumulation regime in operation. This applied in both the collectivist and the post-collectivisation periods; it applied to the way the peasantry, workers and women, were conceptuatlised and incorporated into the development process. The common underlying leitmotif that provided stability and continuity was a powerful, shared sense of nation and nationalism.

Through this comparison of the contrasting microcosmic worlds of rural India and China, I hope to have illustrated the explanatory significance of the institutional dimension. Perhaps you realise you have been asleep when someone shakes you awake; or understand how slow you have been moving when someone overtakes you at speed. Through seeing others, we can see ourselves better. Comparisons help. Through the comparison of the contrasting trajectories of Chinese and Indian development, one can recognise the vital transformative role of instrumental

institutional change in rural China, and the retarding ballast that the inegalitarian and counter-productivist institutional configuration has formed in the Indian case.

5 IN LIEU OF CONCLUSIONS

Radha Kamal Mukerjee had a utopian vision, inspired by Tagore and Gandhi, of an intrinsically “Indian”, value-driven path of development evolution that would

“establish a solidarity between the villager and the city, the labourers and the employers, the specialist and the layman, the brain worker and the manual labourer ... India will not allow the city to exploit the village, she will retain the vitality of life and culture of the village. She will not suck out the blood of one part of society to feed another part..., but she will feel the pulsations of life deep and strong in her throbbing veins in every part of her social system” (Mukerjee 1916: 448–449; cited in Guha 2010: 54–55).

No one can miss the uncanny resonance with Mao’s declaration that, in contrast to Soviet economics, Chinese socialism would dismantle the three great differences: the division between town and county, between industry and agriculture, between mental and manual work. But, equally, none can miss the contrast between the powerlessness of this Indian utopianism and the massed political power driving the Chinese socialist upsurge.

While recognising its awesome transformative power, it is also essential not to glide over the dark side of the mass mobilisation mode of transformation. Its basis is the glue that binds the individual atoms and molecules of a society into a totalising unitary force driven by collective aspiration and ambition. But the polarity of this transformative power can work both ways. A virtuous idea or programme is diffused, universally up-scaled and implemented in startlingly quick time, but so, inevitably, are its mistakes and errors. More sinister, however, is the possibility that the political assertion of some culturally claimed and socially constructed oneness becomes the vehicle for the oppression of various minorities that are deemed not to conform to this unifying societal template. The overwhelming domination of the Han community, and the relative numerical insignificance and peripheral geographical locations of other minority ethnicities, kept such outcomes out of the frame; yet there are anxieties over the form and manner in which the renaissance of Chinese nationalism, materialism and cultural affirmation will express itself in the region and beyond.

The very “indigenous”, very “Indian”, very “value-driven” *Hindutva* nationalistic project of imposing some imagined cultural homogeneity on India’s intrinsic diversity, often through the manipulation of majoritarian democracy, again provides a sobering prospect. History provides an archive of ready examples of such mass projects and processes gone wrong, and it is not unlikely that contemporary India might add to that unfortunate list; awful can be just a quick slide away from awesome.

The last word must belong to the subject of this memorial lecture, and so in ending I return to the wisdom, prescience and increasing relevance of Radha Kamal Mukerjee in several of his many themes of research and reflection.

In last year's memorial lecture, T. S. Papola, the doyen of Indian labour economics, provided a thoughtful and penetrating assessment of the 70-year old pioneering book, *The Indian Working Class*, authored by Radha Kamal Mukerjee in 1945 and concluded: "his ideas, approaches and agenda are as contemporary and relevant today as they were in 1940s ... but, in a large number of areas, his agenda, even though of great relevance even today, remains unfulfilled even after 70 years!" (Papola 2014, p. 21). He was champion of the rights of working people.

Today, I find it appropriate to conclude with a theme that embodies all the essentials of his philosophy, method and message, viz., humanity and its relationship with its habitat. Can nature cope with 2.5 billion voracious – comprising both hungry and hedonistic – consumers growing at 7 per cent each year? Any serious environmental or ecological audit of recent Indian and Chinese development trajectories provide an incontrovertible negative answer. Can the ends of the game be reoriented? And can that powerful institutional agency be deployed to change direction? Or have the catapulting levels and forms of inequality undermined those societal capacities?

In his Sir William Meyer Lectures, Mukerjee (1938, p. 296, cited in Guha 2010) constructs a set of ten contrasting binaries, with the imperatives for progressive social evolution and the practices of social regression arranged on opposing sides of the ecological equation.

"In it Mukerjee summarizes his view of the bad life and the good life. This is a veritable green charter for India, relevant in every detail fully seven decades after it was first drafted. It beautifully illustrates Mukerjee's dicta that humans have no option but to some extent imitate Nature's extraordinarily slow methods" (Guha 2010, pp. 58–59).

Gandhi was of a mind: "there is more to life than increasing its speed". But, as Guha ruefully observes, "even now we await the change in values for which Mukerjee hoped and strove". Mukerjee was appealing to a non-existing social consciousness of an imagined social collectivity, an entity that remains as elusive and distant now as it might have been at his time; if it was a dream then, it is a pipe dream now. The time of our generation might be over, we live on time and resources captured rather than borrowed from a voiceless, still-to-be born generation; carrying on with "business as usual" will ensure it is also a stillborn generation.

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